

**Security Council**

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Letter dated 10 January 2022 from the Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the pleasure to inform you that Norway, in its capacity as President of the Security Council for the month of January 2022, will hold a high-level open debate on the theme “War in cities: protection of civilians in urban settings”, under the item entitled “Protection of civilians in armed conflict”. The open debate will take place on 25 January 2022, at 10 a.m.

In order to guide the discussions on this topic, Norway has prepared a concept note (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(Signed) Mona Juul
Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations



Annex to the letter dated 10 January 2022 from the Permanent Representative of Norway to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Concept note for the Security Council high-level open debate on the theme “War in cities: protection of civilians in urban settings”, to be held on 25 January 2022

I. Objective

This high-level open debate is intended to deepen dialogue on the issue of the protection of civilians in urban warfare, draw attention to and reflect on the devastating humanitarian impacts and identify steps that may be taken by various actors to alleviate those consequences, ensuring the protection of civilians and civilian objects against the effects of urban warfare, in line with international humanitarian law.

II. Context

Armed conflicts are increasingly being fought in urban areas, with devastating and unacceptable humanitarian consequences, with the vast majority of casualties being civilians.¹ While wars in cities are not a new phenomenon, there has been a resurgence of urban warfare in recent decades, with an estimated 50 million civilians around the world now affected by it.² This trend is being fuelled by the rapid rate of urbanization.³ If not addressed through concerted international action, the already unacceptable humanitarian consequences of urban conflict are only set to worsen.

War in cities has different impacts on populations: people are at risk of being killed, injured or disabled. People are also displaced from their homes and are living in undignified conditions, with no idea of when they may return. While those consequences are not unique to armed conflict in urban areas, they occur on a significantly larger scale in urban warfare, given the greater size of those populations and their dependency on interconnected critical infrastructure.

People in cities often face a terrible choice between remaining in their homes while risking bombardment, siege, disease and starvation, fleeing and risking criminal exploitation, sexual violence and deprivation, or being directly targeted by warring factions. In addition, disappearances and the separation of people from their loved ones during conflict create trauma for families and communities and can leave children unaccompanied and vulnerable.

Moreover, the interconnected urban services that are indispensable for sustaining human life are disrupted by the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of hostilities. Schools, hospitals and other essential infrastructure are attacked and destroyed, depriving civilians of education and health care and services, including vaccines. The supply of food, water, sanitation and electricity is also interrupted. The concentration of people and the density of infrastructures mean that a greater number of people are affected, with increasing severity over time as conflict continues and harm to the civilian population accumulates.

¹ See [S/2021/423](#).

² International Committee of the Red Cross, “Waging war in cities: a deadly choice”, video, 29 July 2020.

³ *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision* (United Nations publication, 2019).

Even when fighting has ceased, explosive remnants of war continue to kill and injure and to prevent the rebuilding of communities and people from returning home, going to school and pursuing livelihoods. The safe reconstruction of houses and essential infrastructure is also made more challenging when explosive remnants of war may be buried within the rubble of damaged or destroyed buildings.

This accumulative and protracted civilian suffering exacerbates social divisions caused by the fighting, making it difficult for cities and their inhabitants to heal. It also affects women and men and boys and girls differently, often aggravating existing vulnerabilities and gender inequalities, while tearing the social fabric of communities apart. This also increases the risk of new waves of violence and damages prospects for achieving peace and reconciliation, along with the safe and dignified return of displaced people, and the possibility of reaching the Sustainable Development Goals.

A particular challenge in urban environments is ensuring that military operations are conducted in full conformity with international humanitarian law, including the principles of precaution, distinction and proportionality. Even armed forces doing their best to fully implement international humanitarian law and avoid civilian harm are faced with challenges. The nature of the urban environment challenges the ability of the parties to a conflict to assess and anticipate accurately the expected incidental harm to civilians and civilian objects. This demonstrates that ensuring full compliance with international humanitarian law is more demanding, but even more critical, in such contexts.

In many situations, parties to armed conflict continue to fight in urban areas in ways that do not take those challenges fully into account, for instance, in their use of weapons primarily designed for use in open battlefields, including heavy explosive weapons. This is a major cause of civilian suffering and deaths in situations of urban warfare.⁴ When explosive weapons were used in populated areas in 2020, a total of 88 per cent of those killed and injured were civilians, compared with 16 per cent in other areas.⁵ While civilians may sometimes be prevented from leaving a besieged area, fighting in urban centres often results in an increased need for the essential services that are also often disrupted or destroyed.

It is necessary to make the protection of civilians a priority in the planning and conduct of military operations.

The devastating, cumulative and protracted humanitarian harm caused by urban warfare also puts great demands on humanitarian actors to adapt to the humanitarian needs and vulnerabilities of the populations concerned, based on inclusive engagement with affected communities and taking into account the gender dimension. This includes promoting the full, equal and meaningful participation and leadership of women. It also has a negative impact on the safety and security of humanitarian and health workers. The need for parties to fulfil their obligation to facilitate safe, unhindered access to civilians in need of humanitarian aid is acute. In recent years, the sheer scale of humanitarian suffering caused by urban warfare has created daunting operational, resource and diplomatic challenges for humanitarian and development actors. Past and ongoing conflicts demonstrate the need for effective preventive actions, improved responses to ensure the full protection of civilians and the objects that they rely on, and respect for international humanitarian law.⁶

⁴ See [S/2021/423](#).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ International Committee of the Red Cross, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts: Recommending to Protection in Armed Conflict on the 70th Anniversary of the Geneva Conventions*, (Geneva, 2019).

III. Guiding questions

The discussion may focus on the following questions:

- How can the Security Council better use the tools at its disposal to prevent and respond to the challenges of the accumulated harm caused to the civilian population and infrastructure in urban warfare?
- How can States and parties to conflict improve respect for international humanitarian law and ensure that the protection of civilians is a priority in the planning and conduct of military operations in urban settings?
- How can Member States better employ existing tools to mitigate the humanitarian consequences of urban warfare and reduce civilian harm, including by protecting objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, and prevent the disruption of essential services?
- How can national and local authorities, together with relevant humanitarian and development actors, adapt, improve and coordinate their response, with more sustainable solutions to ensure the continuity of essential services during protracted conflicts in urban areas?
- How can humanitarian organizations, the United Nations system, non-governmental organizations and other relevant actors better provide sustainable humanitarian protection and assistance that are adapted to the accumulated and protracted needs created by urban warfare?

IV. Participation and format

The open debate will be held at the level of Heads of State or Government and is to be chaired by the Prime Minister of Norway, Jonas Gahr Støre.

The following speakers are invited to brief the Council:

- The Secretary-General
- The President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer
- A civil society representative

Should the health and safety situation allow, the in-person participation of the broader membership is welcome.

Delegations are kindly requested to limit their statements to no more than four minutes, masks are to be worn at all times even while addressing the meeting, and delegations are also kindly requested to limit their participation to one representative in the Chamber.

A provisional list of those who have requested to speak will be circulated in advance by email to those who have registered. The list of speakers will be available in hard copy in the Chamber shortly before the beginning of the meeting.

Member States wishing to participate in person should indicate the names of their speakers on the list of speakers through the eSpeakers module of e-deleGATE+. A letter addressed to the President of the Security Council, duly signed by the Permanent Representative or the Chargé d'affaires a.i., containing a request to participate in accordance with rule 37 of the provisional rules of procedure of the Council must be uploaded to the eSpeakers module. Registration for the meeting will open on 20 January 2022, at 9:30 a.m. Delegations speaking in person should not

submit a written statement via e-deleGATE+, as the delivered statement will be included in the provisional verbatim record of the meeting.

The list of speakers will be determined by the order in which requests are received.

Furthermore, delegations wishing to submit written statements instead of participating in the meeting in person may do so through the eSpeakers module of e-deleGATE+ by uploading their statements in Microsoft Word format with a cover letter duly signed by the Permanent Representative or the Chargé d'affaires a.i. and addressed to the President of the Security Council no later than the date of the meeting, that is, 25 January 2022. These statements will be published as part of an official compilation document containing the interventions submitted in connection with the open debate.

Delegates are invited to contact the access focal points of their missions to obtain access to the eSpeakers module of e-deleGATE+. Requests for technical support related to user login and password should be directed to the help desk of the Office of Information and Communications Technology at 212-963-3333 or by e-mail at missions-support@un.int.

Other questions related to the open debate should be directed to the Security Council Affairs Division at dppa-scsb3@un.org.
